

Front Page	Back Page	Date

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CIA: lift the cloak?

Past proposals for a congressional watchdog committee or investigation to check on the Central Intelligence Agency have come to naught. At a time of American military involvement in Vietnam, it is doubtful that present proposals, which many fear could compromise national security, will get any further than they have in past years.

It is, moreover, questionable whether congressional supervision really is the answer. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson have consistently opposed congressional investigations of this sensitive agency.

But the question remains: How does an open society such as the United States ensure the responsibility of an agency shrouded in secrecy, such as the CIA? Certainly, its responsibility cannot be directly to the public. And it is probably too risky to make it responsible to Congress.

But the CIA is already responsible to the President, and it should be up to him to see that the agency understands the nature

and extent of its authority and acts strictly in accord with that understanding. Furthermore, the President should see that the man who holds the extremely sensitive job of directing this agency is as competent and tactful as he can find. (There have been recent reports of declining morale within CIA, allegedly due to a lack of confidence in CIA chief, Admiral William F. Raborn.)

Everyone concerned should be absolutely clear on the distinction between intelligence gathering, which is the primary and proper function of the CIA, and foreign policymaking, which is the responsibility of the President and State Department. Judging from what is known of the Bay of Pigs incident, and certain other operations, the CIA has not always maintained this distinction. It has not always been clear as to its proper role.

When it does come to understand this distinction and act accordingly, a lot of the pressure for congressional investigation will vanish.